
Redesign of the Consumer Expenditure Surveys

Jennifer Edgar

Survey Redesign Panel
January 20, 2010

Survey Purpose

- Collect information on the buying habits of America's consumers, including their expenditures, income, and household characteristics
- Used for periodic revision of the Consumer Price Index (CPI)

Survey Overview

- Conducted by Census Bureau
- Interview Survey: 5 quarterly interviews
 - ▶ Designed personal visit, but about 35% done on phone
 - ▶ Sample size $\approx$ 12,000 addresses per wave
 - ▶ Average response rate $\approx$ 75%
- Diary Survey: 2 one-week self administered diaries
 - ▶ Sample size $\approx$ 12,000 addresses per year
 - ▶ Average response rate $\approx$ 76%

Redesign Motivations

- Why redesign:
 - ▶ Evidence of measurement error
 - ▶ Environmental changes in technology and spending behaviors
 - ▶ Need for greater flexibility
- Objectives:
 - ▶ Verifiable reduction in measurement error, with a particular focus on underreporting

Primary Success Criteria

- Reduction in measurement error
- Improved data quality
- Maintain survey costs

Challenges Faced: CE Surveys

Challenge	Current Interview	Current Diary
Reference period	3 months	Daily diary (kept for 2 weeks)
Proxy reporting	1 HH member reports for whole household	Main respondent, asked to talk to all HH members
Interview length (OMB Estimates)	Five 65-minute interviews	105 minutes/week diary keeping, and three 25-minute interviews
Mode	Designed PV, increasingly by phone	Designed paper, need for web instrument
Interview structure	Standardized, highly scripted interview, minimal flexibility	Organized by expenditure type and day

Challenges Faced: Redesign Process

- Defining survey requirements is challenging
 - ▶ Identifying varied user needs
 - ▶ Reconciling competing interests
- Collecting stakeholder input while maintaining forward progress
- Maintaining ongoing research efforts without waiting for redesign decisions

Redesign Constraints

- Final survey has to meet user needs
 - ▶ Provide required data for CPI
 - ▶ Other user needs will be identified through User Forum (Summer 2010)
 - ▶ Needs will be prioritized to create survey requirements
- Long-term operational survey costs cannot significantly increase

Testing

- Preliminary research currently in the field
 - ▶ Question order effects
 - ▶ Split questionnaire
 - ▶ Reference period
- Statistical research on feasibility of using split questionnaires
- Plans for research workshop to get expert opinions and recommendations on key topics
- Anticipate many research efforts 2012 – 2013

Timeline

- 2009 (completed): Project planning, definition of data quality
- 2010: Identify and prioritize user needs, hold research methodology workshop
- 2011: Develop research roadmap and survey alternatives
- 2012 - 2013: Testing
- 2014 and beyond: Development and implementation of redesigned survey

Costs

- Annual CE research budget to fund most research projects
- Submitted budget initiative for 2011 requesting funding support large scale research